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Jerry Harrison
of the Talking Heads

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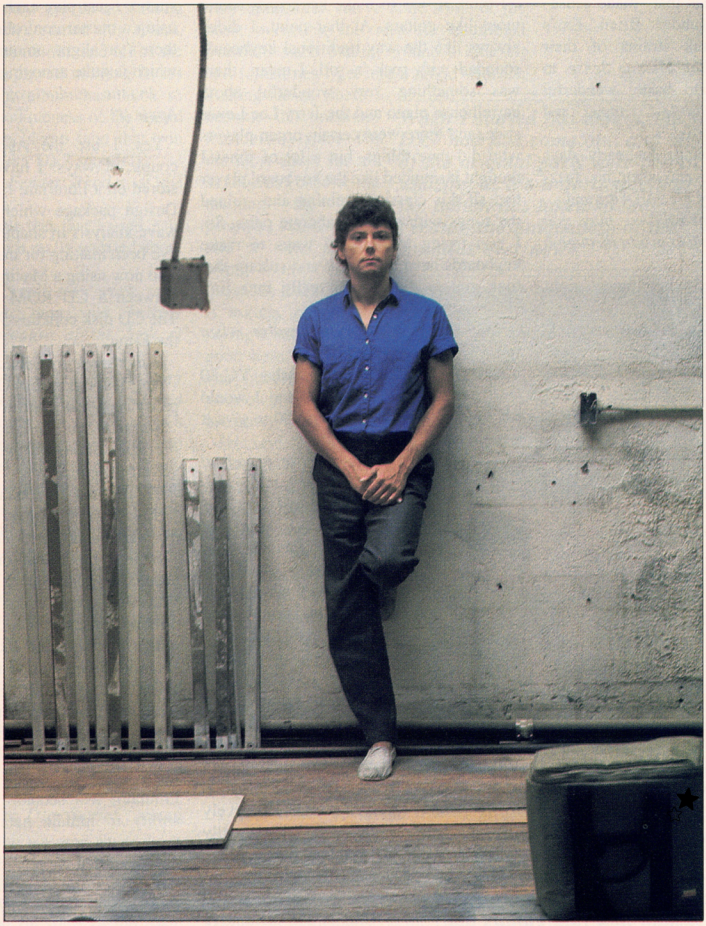
INTERVIEW

The Talking Heads have worn the crown of Rock 'n' Roll's "cutting edge" aristocracy since their inception nearly ten years ago. Invading the gritty world of rock clubs and the trickery of the music business they burst upon the scene in the intellectual outpouring of the "new wave" which strangely enough followed it's antithesis: the insipid anti-intellectual stance of punk. Critics and public alike embraced the cerebral doodlings of group singer and primary songwriter David Byrne, and backed by husband/wife-drums/bass team of Tina Weymouth and Chris Frantz, the Heads' literally packed New York City's most jaded audiences into CBGB's week after week. But to trio or not to trio, that was the question.

Meanwhile, up in Boston, Jerry Harrison was putting his Farfisa in storage and contemplating a career in architecture (though his "Buildings and Food" would come much later). His stay at Harvard University would turn out to be a short one. While recuperating from a whirlwind journey as an original member of Jonathan Richmond's legendary Modern Lovers, Harrison received word that new wave quasars, Talking Heads, were looking for a keyboard player. He responded–and the rest is history.

Jerry's contribution to the band has been enormous. He was an inspired talent and a painstaking

The Talking Heads turn to Harrison's keyboards for texture and melody.



Jerry Harrison
and The Talking Heads

by Elliott Murphy

craftsman just looking for a place to happen, and the vast labyrinths of David Byrne's musings hit the spot. The band has continued to explore and experiment all the intriguing areas that "made sense" from techno-rock (under Brian Eno's tutelage) to the funk strains of their surprise hit movie, *Stop Making Sense*, to their current return to basic, wonderful songs and singing in *Little Creatures* and *True Stories*.

I've known Jerry since his early days with the Modern Lovers when his fuzz-toned Farfisa blew my pre-MIDI'd mind.

The first time I heard you play you were putting your Farfisa organ through a Fuzz-Tone.

Right...I was very technological right away.

It was kind of like a very primitive MIDI?

I also put the Fender Rhodes through a Fuzz-Tone.

With the Modern Lovers?

For the honking sound of "She Cracked." It had the tone of a French Police horn which I rather liked.

What made you start thinking in that direction back then?

I think it was to make keyboards sound more like guitars. At that point, I didn't always like the way traditional keyboards sounded with rock 'n roll. I mean, there was something very wonderful about barrelhouse piano and the Jerry Lee Lewis style, and there were certain organ players who did nice things, but a lot of times I thought it sounded like the keyboard player had all this classical training and ruined the songs with overly elaborate parts. So, I was trying to think of ways to make keyboards have the attack and sustain that fuzz guitars did, I was really into Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton.

How did that approach evolve when you joined Talking Heads?

Well, I was using a Yamaha YC-30 Organ and a Fender Rhodes and I would run the organ through a phase 90 to give it a synthesized Leslie effect.

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And to make a radical jump from that set-up,what would be your current selection of equipment for the next Talking Heads' tour?

I know I would use my Emulator and probably my DX7 and I might use a master controller keyboard. I have this Prophet T-8 that I really like the feel of, and I'm going to see if there's some way I can get it MIDI controlled so that it works effectively as a controller. I really dislike the idea of big stacks of keyboards on stage.

What is the advantage of the keyboard on the Prophet as opposed to the DX7?

Well, you have two keyboard styles that you can buy. One is a DX7 style,patterned after an electric organ. The Prophet T-8 has (like the Roland and the Yamaha master keyboards) a more weighted action that feels in between a real piano and a Hammond organ. There's something solid feeling about that and anyone who grew up playing the real piano likes that action. It's not really faster but there's something meatier about it. I have a lot of equipment and I haven't really set up how I'm going to use it on stage because I've only been using it in the studio. I just play each instrument without using a master controller because at times there's a slight amount of MIDI delay which is quite annoying.

In the studio you're also using an Apple //?

Yes, I use the Apple computer in a couple of ways: I have my DX7 sounds stored on a librarian; I also have the Digi-Design package which allows you to do wave analysis in shaping the samples that I've been making for the Emulator; and I'm also now using a Macintosh as an interface between a CD ROM and the Emulator. The CD disk contains 500 floppy disks for the E-mu.

Is that made by Emulator?

No, it's made by Optical Media. It's pretty state-of-the-art. It's amazing.

But with the Talking Heads, certainly the last album, the musical approach is getting simpler.

It's true, and more naturalistic.

How does this affect these state-of-the-art ingredients that you're using?

Well, I think that on stage it will be absolutely essential. I actually used the Emulator quite a lot on the last two Talking Heads albums. I used it to play things that sounded like an accordion or Hammond Organ, and it's pretty accurate. Usually if you're in the studio and there's the instrument there–let's say a real good piano–you use it. If there's an organ, you use it. But to lug all of that stuff around for live performance is a bit much. So the Emulator will become very useful for its ability to imitate natural instruments. I think that's how we will try and generate the sound that we recorded live.

It seems to have come full circle: Synthesizers were originally going to introduce new and original sounds with unique dimensions, but now, the Emulator is trying to reproduce natural sounds.

Well, you can take the natural sounds and mold them so that they take upon a quality which is beyond or different than any natural instrument makes. To me, this is one of the more fascinating things that you can do. Just slightly altering the sound so that it doesn't sound like anyone else's sample.

You are in the midst of recording your second solo album. What is the difference

Photo by Stephanie Chernikowski

in your keyboard approach as opposed to the Talking Heads?

Some of the songs on my album are based around a particular keyboard part much more that they are on a Talking Heads album. When I started this album, the DX7 had just come out, and all of the original parts were played utilizing it. It's unfortunate that the album has taken so long, because the uniqueness of the sound is over now. Every demo tape that you hear now is filled with DX7 sounds.

It's become the Fender Rhodes of the 80's.

I know. But I still feel that I used it in a unique way. I'm not really worried about it.

The textures of your solo work seem far more complex than with Talking Heads. Is that because of the lack of guitar?

There's guitar on it–but it's a very particular kind of guitar– dry, plugged straight into the board. Alex Weir plays a very precise, percussive, rhythm guitar and the balance of that guitar sound and my keyboard sound was the basis for some of the music that fills up this album. I think that my solo album is more similar to *Speaking In Tongues* or *Remain In Light* that it is to *Little Creatures* or our new album *True Stories.*

Is it true that the band did the sessions for Little Creatures *and* True Stories *at the same time?*

Yes. Of course we ended up doing overdubs and the tracks for *True Stories* were changed a bit.

How did you approach the keyboards on True Stories*? Was it done primarily live or in overdubs?*

Quite a bit of the *True Stories* album was done live.

What were you using?

There was an Emulator, sometimes a real piano, sometimes a Hammond Organ. I also played guitar on some of the basic tracks and overdubbed the keyboards. Keyboards are very often considered overdubs because if you want to do room micing on a piano, you can't do it during a live session. And also, the tendency is to take the electronic keyboards into the control room so you know exactly what it sounds like as you do it. But we found that with certain songs, even if the sound wasn't as good as you could get, later there was something that just jelled as we played it live and the overdubs didn't help.

When you do overdubs do you prefer to work alone or is the rest of the band present?

Usually everyone's around. Because very often after you've done some of the basic overdubs, the idea for additional overdubs starts batting around a little bit and sometimes I get into a mood with the Talking Heads where I become this medium. Particularly since I'm the most adept for the keyboards I become the medium for other people's ideas. I get into a state of just trying to answer questions that someone is asking, rather than saying what will sound good here. Of course, you obviously put in your own, but it works out pretty well.

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Photo by Ebet Roberts

I'd say! I want to ask you a very practical question. It seems to me that with the advent of MIDI and the Emulator the biggest problem now is the indexing and cataloguing of all the available sounds.

I think it's a nightmare!

What is your approach to that?

I've been trying to set up a filing system on the Macintosh where I use Microsoft File, a data base program, to describe and list the sounds and place where you've used it, and perhaps with what songs you've used it on.

Can you estimate how many sounds are in that master file?

I have over 700 on the Emulator. It's now possible to have 3000 sounds on the DX7, and on analog synthesizers there's hundreds. I think one of the major changes is that you become a librarian rather than a synthesist, particularly on the DX7. There are all these professional programmers who have mastered a very complicated way of creating sounds, I think that's a great problem because records start to sound more alike. There's a particular sound that E-mu made called Shakahachie, which is this great Japanese instrument, and I used it while producing The Violent Femmes in the song *World Without Mercy.* Now I've heard something quite similar to that on Peter Gabriel's album and you hear it on soundtracks.

Has any of your equipment been modified?

I have a hard disk on my Emulator, and not too many people have that. It means I have more instant access to the sounds that I use all the time.

Why is it that in your choice of groups to produce, most noticeably The Violent Femmes, you have chosen non-high tech bands? Almost primitive.

I've never done an album of the kind of stuff that this equipment is made for–like sequenced music. I'd like to do that. It's just the way things happen. I think that one of the things that I kind of pride myself on, in both my selections of sounds and the way I play, is that I try and make keyboards not sound–and this goes back to the Modern Lovers–typical. And normal sequenced keyboards have become such a typical sound that I try and shy away from that. I quite like it when parts are there but you don't really think about them. And yet if you took them away you'd really notice. I think that's one of the secrets of good music. I like it when all the parts jell so well that you're not always aware of like, "Wow! What a fantastic bass part!" I think that it often makes the song less of a song, and it becomes just the components. This is one

of the problems jazz musicians often have when they try and play rock n' roll, because they become so involved in creating this masterpiece of a part–that of course has to be as complicated as their technique allows–that they lose sight of what the role of the part is in terms of the song. It makes the role of the singer really difficult.

In production,what recent technological advances have you found most useful.

I think the use of samples.

I've heard that you're a sampling master.

Particularly with the Bell BD80. It allows you to do things like–if there were parts of a song that weren't played well–you have the option of sampling from other parts of the song and inserting them in later. It allows someone who is able to do that quite well, to take a performance that has a magic to it but has some flaws, and fix it up. It is a way of getting around the rigidity that you get sometimes from a sequencer or drum machine.

You seem to be shying away from drum machines lately.

Yes, because I found a great drummer. (Ed. Note: Jerry is currently playing with Rick Jaeger, formerly of Crosby, Stills Nash and also Dave Mason.)

Don't you think that's a common reaction today?

Yes, I think so. I think that what happens is that everything goes round in circles. People will shy away from drum machines and then drum machines will get better or someone will find other ways of using them. I think that people are often using drum machines to begin their tracks because, besides other things, it allows for quick edits and greater control on video projects.

Which drum machine do you prefer when you do use one?

I have the Emulator SP-12.

The other production technique you've mastered is creating cross-rhythms by the use of delays.

That was something I first became aware of through Brian Eno. The use of delays was one of his favorite techniques. And it was something Talking Heads used to stimulate ideas for *Remain In Light*. It's a great technique.

If David Byrne presents a song to the band on acoustic guitar, how much would the rhythm of that song evolve as you record?

We have used so many different ways to write songs, that no one description works. There are times when David has come in with quite a clear idea of how he wants the song and what everyone's part should sound like and, of course, it gets changed once you start to work it out and work with it. And then there have been times when the song is just a sketch and it gets arranged and in a certain way is written by the band as we work on it. We've also done, you might say, "jams" and pieced together particularly effective interactions between instruments and we've taped and built the song from those interactions. The furthest was *Remain In Light* where we purposely did not write anything until we got to the studio. We just went in and tried to experiment.

You construct your own songs in the studio.

Yes I do. I really like that because there's something about the first time that you play a musical idea, that if you just try to learn to replay it you lose something. That doesn't always happen. Sometimes if you practice the stuff for six months you play it better than ever. But there is something nice about playing an idea when it is fresh.

Do you have any immediate production plans?

I'm hoping to produce a band from Milwaukee called Semi-Twang that's just been signed to Warner Brothers.

They're a very "roots" band.

Yes, once again it's just the opposite of electronic music. But I really want to

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HARRISON *from page 29*

finish my solo album which I've put off so many times for both the Talking Heads and the Violent Femmes album.

What will be the difference between your new album and your first solo effort, The Red and Black*?*

I think the major difference is that it doesn't have the experiment in time signatures that *The Red and Black* had. I think it's a little easier to digest, a little simpler. I also think that my singing is alot better.

You once told me that you had rhythm parts on The Red and Black *that even the percussionist couldn't play.*

I know. It was really nightmarish. Rock players, including myself, are not used to playing in 5/4 time or 7/4 time and I wanted to see what the poly-rhythms we had done on *Remain In Light* would sound like in other time signatures. I was trying to create cross rhythms in those time signatures. It was quite challenging. And the other idea was to make it not so obvious that you were doing something like that.

Today's sound seems to be simpler but with more precision. Is this because of digital recording?

I think that there's two levels of listening. I think there are people who are used to very immaculately recorded records, the kind you hear on the radio. And then you have people who almost reject that sound out of hand and like underground bands, like all the hardcore records from California. Those records are all made for about $10,000 or less. And they are made in the old way of people going into the studio and just slamming out.

On Little Creatures *and* True Stories, *The Talking Heads seem to be able to walk that fine line of doing both. People viewed the* Little Creatures *album as a return to the basic concept of the band and yet you also kept the audience that enjoyed the musical complexities that the band experimented with on earlier albums.*

I think that one of the most refreshing things about *Little Creatures* was that it was one of the first albums where melody was maybe more important than rhythm. Though there were interesting rhythms, they weren't so far in the forefront. And I think David's singing had improved to the point, and Chris's and Tina's and mine too, that we could create music where the voices were a little more prominent. And in that way it was old-fashioned.

Who gets the credit for that?

I really think ET (Ed. Note: Engineer Eric Thorngren) does.

What are your thoughts on computers in music today?

I think they can do much more than they do now. As people unify their systems of recording, playing, sequencing, and writing scores, you will see real advancement. One thing I would like to see on a mixing board, is the ability to SMPTE encode any given point of a song and to be able to see it graphically represented. Then use the SMPTE code and graphics to trigger edits or MIDI effects. Then you could assign a mute to take place at a certain point rather than trying to punch it in–you could just type in with a computer keyboard any kind of command and it would be done.

That would involve alot of graphic editing.

You would have to develop a system where the song map screen would effectively aid you.

For the most part, recording is still a blind science.

Yes. Except for the SSL board that allows you to see things like frequency analysis. Or call up a rather inexact description of the VCA's. Another thing I'd like to see is a screen that would allow you to compare faders of different mixes done on one song. Whereas now, you can only listen and watch from the current mix and you have no way of accessing information from previous mixes. That's the kind of thing you'd want from a computer. Musicians are beginning to see that you don't have to be a victim of the computer scientist.

And what would you like to see computers do with keyboards?

I think the direction they're going in is fine. They're giving people more for less money – access to enormous libraries, higher sampling quality, more control .

Can you see keyboards becoming a two man job?

Oh sure. Particularly if you're using a master controller on stage, you'd need to have someone loading sounds offstage.

That may be a whole new career category.

My floppy-disk loadey!

KCSOFTWARE *from page 62*

the studio every time you transfer your work on to tape, it is possible to transfer edited Sequencer-Plus files (via MIDI) to a Roland MSQ-700 sequencer and leave the "big guy" at home. MSQ-700 tracks can also be transferred to Sequencer-Plus for editing.

Conclusions:

Octave Plateau has developed a high powered, versatile composing tool which utilizes a friendly routine of user commands. Considering the rapid development rate of sequencer editing features, it is impossible to expect any one software developer to include them all. The writers of Sequencer-Plus have focused their attention on developing a sophisticated editing system for individual Note and MIDI events. With this level

Sequencer-Plus

is a serious contribution to the compositional process. Included in updates will be the integration of Patchmaster and a MIDI system organizer.

mastered, I hope future revisions incorporate a series of "search and global edit" commands which offer the user flexibility to change or unify values for specified groups of labeled notes within a track. The only other limitation I can think of is Sequencer-Plus' inability to convert its edited sequence files to standard music notation.

After a year of continuous use in and out of the studio, I've developed many creative applications for all its editing features. Sequencer-Plus has lived up to my expectations of a sequencer's contribution to the compositional process. Included in their future update plans is the integration of Patchmaster, a MIDI system organizer and patch librarian giving users the ability to automatically change their instruments setup and patches when loading a song for playback.

-Frank Doyle